

Making WAVES: Remembering the First Women of the Hospital Corps

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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As the bus arrived in Bethesda, Md., on a summer afternoon in 1945, Frona Liston could not have been more excited. The 20-year old from North Canton, Ohio, had just graduated from basic training at Hunter College, N.Y., and was now about to begin Hospital Corps School at the National Naval Medical Center (NNMC). Joining the Navy and serving in the Hospital Corps had been Liston's wish since the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"I had the urge to do something and help," said Liston. "I felt this was my duty. My brother had already joined the Navy, and nearly died during boot camp and got out on medical discharge. I felt like I had to pick up the ball for him."



World War II brought new opportunities for civic-minded women like Liston who wanted to contribute to the war effort. And for the first time in Navy history, women could serve in a wide-range of occupational specialties and rates under the auspices of the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES) or the Women's Reserve program. Among more than 97,000 Navy women who served during World War II, almost 89 percent were WAVES; the remaining were active duty and reserve nurses.

The WAVES included the Navy's first women physicians, dentists, allied health specialists, medical administrators, and hospital corpsmen like Liston (who were referred to as CorpsWAVES). Outside of nurses, CorpsWAVES were the largest group of women to represent Navy Medicine during the war.

On August 3, 1942, the U.S. Navy organized the WAVES under the direction of Lt. Cmdr. Mildred McAfee, a former president of the private women's liberal arts college Wellesley. The WAVES program was designed to address the chronic personnel shortages on the home front and to fill in the gaps caused by deploying personnel to the Pacific and European theaters. Initially, CorpsWAVES were restricted to commands and activities in the Continental United States. After 1943, CorpsWAVES were also assigned to Hawaii.

Among the Navy's first CorpsWAVES was Stella Cerra, a 24-year old from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who enlisted in October 1942. After attending Navy boot camp at Oklahoma Agricultural & Mechanical (A&M) College in Stillwater, Oklahoma, she reported to Bethesda for Hospital Corps training.

CorpsWAVES were generally older than their male counterparts. Whereas men could enlist as young as 18, WAVES were required to be at least 20 years old. A number of them like Cerra entered the service with either some college or experience working as technicians in medical and dental fields. A number of the more tenured CorpsWAVES advanced through the grades more expeditiously. Just two years into her career, on February 10, 1945, Cerra and fellow CorpsWAVES Barbara C. Unsworth became the first female corpsmen promoted to the grade of Chief Petty Officer (Chief Pharmacist's Mate).

Although many of the first WAVES went through basic training at Oklahoma A&M, and Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls, Iowa, the overwhelming majority of them were indoctrinated at Hunter College in Bronx, N.Y. Popularly referred to as the "USS Hunter" during the war, the Navy commandeered the school in February 1943. From February 17, 1943, until the end of the war, USS Hunter received about 2,000 new WAVES seamen

apprentices every two weeks. Over the course of the 6-week training program, WAVES learned how to become sailors—they marched, drilled, underwent physical conditioning, and were introduced to Navy protocol, traditions, and customs.

At Hunter, recruits were also classified into enlisted ratings. Upon their request, those with backgrounds in science, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, or as technicians—and on the recommendation of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED)—were designated CorpsWAVES with the grade of Hospital Apprentice Second Class (E-2). Those with additional experience and education could be designated Hospital Apprentice First Class (E-3) or even Pharmacist's Mate Third Class (E-4) before being sent to one of 17 naval hospitals for 4-weeks of "Hospital Corps School" training. Upon completion, the CorpsWAVES were promoted in grade and then typically assigned to a naval hospital, dispensary, or sent to one of 10 enlisted technician schools then available to women.

After January 12, 1944, most prospective CorpsWAVES received basic training at Hospital Corps School at NNMC Bethesda, MD. The course of instruction originally lasted four weeks and covered the topics of anatomy, physiology, first aid and minor surgery, hygiene and sanitation, nursing, metrology, pharmacology and included three weeks of ward duty. The first class of 230 hospital apprentices graduated from the school on February 7, 1944. Every two weeks thereafter between 230 and 240 enlisted women were sent to the school.

The first African Americans entered the WAVES at the end of 1944. The following year, in April 1945, Ruth Isaacs, Katherine Horton and Inez Patterson became the first African-American female corpsmen when they graduated from Corps School.

The WAVES program came to an end during post-war demobilization and the last class graduated from Bethesda's Hospital Corps School on January 8, 1946.

At its peak wartime strength in 1945, CorpsWAVES accounted for a quarter of all hospital corpsmen in the Navy. And as the war raged overseas and Navy hospitals patient loads grew exponentially, these trailblazers went far to keep the beleaguered Navy Medical Department afloat.

Postscript:

In June 1948, President Harry S Truman signed into law the Armed Services Integration Act granting all women the chance to serve in the regular military. On July 7, 1948, former CorpsWAVES HM1 Ruth Flora of Bowling Green, Ky., was sworn into active duty, becoming the first female corpsmen to earn this distinction.

With the induction of WAVES nearly 90 years ago, Navy Medicine truly came its own and there was no turning back. Today, the legacy of CorpsWAVES lives on in the careers of the 8,000+ women serving in the Hospital Corps who help ensure Navy Medicine continues to project Medical Power in support of Naval Superiority.

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